DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 476 412 CS 512 020

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TITLE	Breaking Barriers, Building Bridges: Critical Discussion of Social Issues.
INSTITUTION	MarcoPolo Education Foundation.; National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, IL.; International Reading Association, Newark, DE.
PUB DATE	2003-02-25
NOTE	7p.
AVAILABLE FROM	ReadWriteThink, International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Rd., P.O. Box 8139, Newark, DE 19714-8139. E-mail: comments@readwritethink.org. For full text: http://www.readwritethink.org/ lessons.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Class Activities; Journal Writing; Lesson Plans; Middle Schools; *Picture Books; *Racial Bias; Reader Response; *Sex Bias; Social Status
IDENTIFIERS	Equality (Social); *Social Justice

ABSTRACT

Noting that picture books can invite students to engage in critical discussion of complex issues of race, class, and gender, this lesson plan helps students to confront the injustice of barriers that separate human beings from one another and to examine the role of prejudice and stereotypes in sustaining these barriers. During the five 45-minute sessions, students will: engage in critical discussions of three shared texts; analyze and compare the three shared texts in terms of genre, historical settings, conflicts, character development, and themes; explore the craft of the authors and artists; discover the potential of the picture book for presenting complex ideas about the human experience; engage in independent reading of nonfiction to prepare for shared reading experiences and to enrich the group discussions of the shared texts; use intertextual links to build understanding; confront injustices and inequities in the past and present; learn how literature can become a catalyst for social action: breaking barriers and building bridges; respond to shared texts in group discussions and in Response Journals; respond to independent reading experiences in small group discussions and in Response Journals; and learn to formulate their own questions to generate critical study of literary texts. The instructional plan, lists of resources, student assessment/reflection activities, and a list of National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association (NCTE/IRA) Standards addressed in the project are included. (RS)

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Breaking Barriers, Building Bridges: Critical Discussion of Social Issues

ED 476 412

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Grade Band

6-8

Estimated Lesson Time

Five 45-minute sessions

Overview

Picture books can invite students to engage in critical discussion of complex issues of race, class, and gender. They "show how people can begin to take action on important social issues . . . and help us question why certain groups are positioned as 'others'" (Harste, 2000, p. 507). They challenge students to confront the injustice of barriers that separate human beings from one another and to examine the role of prejudice and stereotypes in sustaining these barriers. Read aloud, they enable students to engage in dialogue as they consider the narratives in terms of historical contexts, the nature of the implied barriers, and how individuals can take action to promote social justice and equity.

From Theory to Practice

Benedict, Susan and Lenore Carlisle, editors. (1992). *Beyond words: Picture books for older readers and writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Harste, Jerome. (2000). "Supporting critical conversation in classrooms." In K. M. Pierce (Ed.) *Adventuring with books: A booklist for pre-K—grade 6* (pp. 507-554). Urbana, IL: NCTE.

Moss, Joy F. (2002). *Literary discussion in the elementary school*. Urbana, IL: NCTE. (Pages 74-75 are most pertinent to this lesson.)

Saunders, Sheryl Lee. (1999). *Look—and learn! Using picture books in grades five through eight*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Tiedt, Iris McClellan. (2000). *Teaching with picture books in the middle school*. Newark, Delaware: IRA.

Student Objectives

Students will

- engage in critical discussions of three shared texts.
- analyze and compare the three shared texts in terms of genre, historical settings, conflicts, character development, and themes.

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- explore the craft of the authors and artists.
- discover the potential of the picture book for presenting complex ideas about the human experience.
- engage in independent reading of nonfiction to prepare for shared reading experiences and to enrich the group discussions of the shared texts.
- use intertextual links to build understanding.
- confront injustices and inequities in the past and present.
- learn how literature can become a catalyst for social action: breaking barriers and building bridges.
- respond to shared texts in group discussions and in Response Journals.
- respond to independent reading experiences in small group discussions and in Response Journals.
- learn to formulate their own questions to generate critical study of literary texts.

Resources

- Interactive Venn Diagram
- Jerry Spinelli Web Site
- Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard Web Site
- Teaching Children about Race
- Jacqueline Woodson Web Site
- The Ruby Bridges Foundation Web Site

Instructional Plan

Resources

1. *Through My Eyes* by Ruby Bridges (NY: Scholastic Press, 1999)
2. *The Story of Ruby Bridges* by Robert Coles; illus. by George Ford (NY: Scholastic, 1995)
3. *The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson; illus. by E.B.Lewis (NY: G.P.Putnam's Sons, 2001)
4. *The Royal Bee* by Frances Park and Ginger Park; illus. by Christopher Zhong-Yuan Zhang (Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills Press, 2000)
5. *Virgie Goes to School with Us Boys* by Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard; illus. by E.B. Lewis (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000)
6. *Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli (NY: Harper/Trophy, 1990)
7. *Knots in My Yo-yo String: The Autobiography of a Kid* by Jerry Spinelli (NY: Knopf, 1998)
8. Response Journals

Session One Preparation

Read the autobiography of Ruby Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, as well as *The Story of Ruby Bridges* (Robert Coles), a picture story book about this African American who, as a six-year-old child, became a pioneer in school integration when she broke a racial barrier to enter an all-white school in New Orleans in 1960. Students work in small groups to discuss the people and events in American history described in these books. Students are also invited to use Google to search for background information on the Internet about Ruby Bridges as well as Jacqueline Woodson. (See also recommended Web resources. After they listen to and discuss *The Other Side* by Woodson, the students are given time to record their thoughts in their Response Journals.) [Note: If the students are not familiar with literary terms such as viewpoint, setting, and metaphor, specific preparation will be necessary.]

Session One

In a whole-group session, the students listen to and discuss *The Other Side*, a picture story book by Jacqueline Woodson. This story is told from the viewpoint of Clover, an African American girl who lives in a town with a fence that separates the black side of town from the white side. Clover tells the story of the summer she becomes friends with Annie, a white girl who lives on the other side of the fence. A few questions are introduced to initiate a discussion:

1. What do you notice about the front cover? What do you think the title means?
2. What was the viewpoint in this story? Why do you think the author used this viewpoint?
3. Why did Clover's mother warn her not to climb over the fence?
4. How did the Clover and Annie work out a way around this racial barrier? How did they manage to "build bridges"?
5. How did the books about Ruby Bridges help you figure out the implied setting for this story and the significance of the fence?
6. How is the fence used as a metaphor in this story?
7. Why do you think Jacqueline Woodson wrote this story? What did you learn about this author that would help you answer this question?

Session Two Preparation

The reading experiences prior to and during Session One serve as the primary preparation for the study of *The Royal Bee*. In addition, the students can work with partners to search for information about Frances and Ginger Park on the Internet. After they listen to and discuss *The Royal Bee*, the students are given time to write in their Journals about the connections between the authors and their work.

Session Two

In this whole-group session, the students listen to and discuss *The Royal Bee*, a picture story book by Frances and Ginger Park. This is the story of Song-ho, a poor peasant boy who is determined to learn how to read and write. However, he lives in Korea over a century ago when only the sons of wealthy families are allowed to go to school. Song-ho finds a way to break this barrier and to take control of his own destiny. A few questions are introduced to initiate discussion:

1. Examine the front and back covers, the title pages, and the Authors' Note. What do you learn about the setting, the central character, and the inspiration for this story?
2. [At the conclusion of the story] What kind of barrier is featured in this story?
3. What action does Song-ho take to break through this barrier?
4. What action does the teacher take to stand up against injustice and help Song-ho build a bridge out of a life of poverty? What role do the students play in this story?
5. Compare Song-ho's response to the final question at the *Royal Bee* with the response of the other finalist in this national academic contest. [Note: Students may choose to use the interactive Venn diagram for this and other comparing activities in this lesson.]
6. Compare this story with the story of Clover and Annie in *The Other Side*.
7. Why do you think the authors of *The Royal Bee* included their note at the beginning of this book?

Session Three Preparation

The reading and writing experiences prior to this whole-group session serve as preparation for the study of *Virgie Goes to School with Us Boys* by Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard. Students also work together with partners to search for information on the Internet about the author. (See also the article by Howard, "Teaching Children about Race," in the Web Resources.)

Session Three

In this third whole-group session, the students listen to and discuss *Virgie Goes to School with Us Boys*, a picture book by Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard who was inspired by childhood stories of her grandfather to write this story. Set in the post-Civil War South, this is the story of Virgie who is determined to go to school with her brothers who attend a Quaker school for freed slaves. Although her brother tells her "girls don't need school," her parents finally decide to allow her to go. Her father tells his children, "All free people need learning—old folk, young folk...small girls, too" (unpaged). The author includes a note at the back of the book to provide information about

the historical context for this story as well as its connection to her own family. A few questions are introduced to initiate discussion in this read-aloud session and to guide written responses in their Journals at the conclusion of the group session:

1. Examine the front and back covers. What do you think is the setting? What clues about this story do the title and picture provide?
2. Who is telling this story? Why do you think the author chose this viewpoint?
3. What is unusual about the way this story is told?
4. What barriers are featured in this story?
5. How do the people in this story break barriers caused by racial and gender stereotypes and prejudice?
6. Why do you think the author described the long walk to school in such detail?
7. What did you learn from the author's note at the back of the book and from her dedication?
8. Did this note change the way you viewed this story? Explain. Why do you think this note was not included in the front of the book as in *The Royal Bee*?
9. Compare this story with the other books we have read as part of this unit.

Session Four Preparation

Students review what they have recorded in their Response Journals and then write about the literary themes they have discovered as well as connections between these stories and their own lives. Finally, they compose a response to the question: "What can you do to help break down barriers and build bridges in your own world?" Students bring their Journals to this fourth session, the "synthesis session."

Session Four

The synthesis session begins with a discussion of the literary themes the students have identified and recorded in their Journals. Then they focus on the final question and consider how they can take action to break barriers they have identified in their own worlds and to build bridges from what is to what could be.

Session Five Preparation

As a homework assignment, students read *Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli and keep a running record of their responses to this novel. Students are also invited to work in class with partners to search for information about Spinelli and his work on the Internet. (See also the Web Resources below.) Some students might also be interested in reading Spinelli's autobiography, *Knots in My Yo-yo String* and discovering the way this author translates real life into fiction. The chapter called "Dr. Winter's Finger" (pp.102-109) provides fascinating insights about the origins of *Maniac Magee*. In preparation for the whole-group session, the students formulate 2-3 questions that would be used to generate a critical discussion of this novel.

Session Five

At the conclusion of the discussion prompted by these student-initiated questions, the students are asked to compare the books featured in the first four sessions with *Maniac Magee* and to explain how these books could serve as preparation for reading Spinelli's book. *Maniac Magee* is the story of a racially divided town, Two Mills, Pennsylvania, in which the East End and West End are two hostile camps separated by Hector Street. Maniac Magee, a legendary hero in a contemporary realistic novel, crosses Hector Street and moves between the East End and West End in an attempt to break down barriers, build bridges between these camps, and bring together those who have learned to see each other as the enemy. Maniac is a larger-than-life character who confronts the prejudice, ignorance, and fear that he finds on both sides of Hector Street. He is also a "regular kid" who is searching for a home and a family. A few examples of student-initiated questions are included below. Students are invited to consult their Journal entries and other notes from Internet searches or Spinelli's autobiography to contribute additional ideas to this discussion.

1. What clues did the author give you to let you know this novel is both a tall-tale and realism?
2. Why did the author put the jump-rope rhyme at the beginning of the story?
3. Why did the author include all of Maniac's amazing feats?
4. Why did the author create a character without any prejudice?
5. Maniac is a tall-tale hero. What was his quest?

6. Maniac is a regular kid. What was his quest?
7. Why is Grayson an important character?
8. How did Mars Bar help Maniac Magee with his quests?
9. How is Hector Street like the fence in *The Other Side*?
10. What barriers are in this novel? How do they get broken?
11. What bridges were built in this town?
12. If you read Spinelli's autobiography, what did you find out about how he got the idea for this novel?

Web Resources

The Ruby Bridges Foundation
www.rubybridges.org/story.htm
Site of the Ruby Bridges Foundation. Students can read her story told in her own words.

Jacqueline Woodson
http://www.randomhouse.com/teachers/authors/wood.html
Biography of author Jacqueline Woodson, winner of the Coretta Scott King Honor Book Award for *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This.*

Jerry Spinelli
www.carr.lib.md.us/authco/spinelli-j.htm
An online interview with author Jerry Spinelli.

Teaching Children about Race
www.radcliffe.edu/quarterly/199703/page28a.html
Read the article "Teaching Children about Race" by children's book author Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard.

Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard
www.childrenslit.com/f_elizabethhoward.html
This Web page features a biography of Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard and reviews of her books.

Student Assessment/Reflections

Assessment is an ongoing process throughout this cumulative lesson. Objectives that are used to guide the development of the lesson plan also provide criteria for assessment of the students' involvement and understanding as readers, writers, and thinkers in response to literary experiences as the plan is translated into practice. The teacher monitors the students' participation in the group sessions, their contributions to literary discussions, their responses to independent reading selections, and their Response Journal entries. For example, in preparation for Session Four, the students are given specific written assignments to record in their Journals. These entries provide relevant information about what each student has learned from this literary experience. The student-initiated questions in Session Five provide further evidence of the students' literary learning as well as their grasp of the central focus of this lesson.

NCTE/IRA Standards

2 - Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

3 - Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate

texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

11 - Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

12 - Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

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